

Enduring the Squeeze  
Romans 12:12b  
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We all know the saying; “a picture is worth a thousand words, picture this with me. A Family Circle comic, the father and one of the children are walking in the snow. The snow is up to the waist of the child, the child is working hard to walk through it. The snow is up to the knees of the father who is jovially saying; “this is nothing, when I was young we had snow up to here!” as he points to his waist. We laugh, but it’s actually making a sad point, the father isn’t seeing the situation from his child’s perspective. Today’s focus; “be patient in suffering” is no laughing matter, it isn’t entertaining and we won’t have all the answers at the end of the day. However, let’s start by picturing the problem ~ our context. Plan and simple, there is suffering. On this poster board, I have put some of the nation and world section articles of the Wisconsin Journal from the last few weeks. In these articles, we have the tip of the iceberg on stories of suffering. “From Southeast Asia to South Pacific: Quakes Wreak Death, Despair. Defiant Iran Flexes Missiles, Suicide Blast Sends Message in Pakistan, Food Crisis in Guatemala, Ranks of Poor, Uninsured Growing. [point to poster two]. On this poster board I’ve put some of concerns I know of in our congregation; unemployment, huge losses in retirement savings, concerns about teenagers, declining health, living with dying, grieving over loved ones, aging parents, living with impacts of alcoholism, hard health diagnoses, loneliness, relationships that are struggling, individuals wrestling with identity... again, that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Sure we could ignore the topic of suffering or we could be obsessed by it, there are church communities that go both of those directions, but we’re not going to go to the extremes rather I would like us to follow Paul’s guidance in a faithful response to living with the reality of suffering.

Our text for today...”be patient in suffering” is in the context of this section in Romans we’ve been studying for the last month on the marks/evidence of a true Christian. In the context of genuine love, in response to grace in our lives Paul challenges us with these admonitions. Today’s “be patient in suffering” is intricately woven into last week’s “rejoice in hope” and next week’s “persevere in prayer.” We could have looked at all three together, but the agonizing reality of suffering is something to consider, in and of itself, while still remembering the bookends of hope and prayer on either side.

The key question “Why does God allow suffering in the world” has been asked since the Bible times. We have one answer, although it’s somewhat unsatisfactory to the modern mind, in the story of Job. In the story, Job, a faithful follower of God, loses everything he loves, as the Adversary tests Job’s sincerity. The Adversary poses the question, “does Job love God because Job is richly blessed?” Job answers the question with a firm “no,” when those blessings are taken from him and Job still remains faithful. The story of Job isn’t to answer the question; why does God allow suffering in the world; it’s to reveal the depths of faith in the midst of profound suffering!

The key question “Why does God allow suffering in the world?” has been answered in many ways. Suffering does test our faith. Suffering can result from a misuse of human freedom, commonly called free will. Suffering can work for God’s good. Suffering can be used to bring us to repentance for things that are not life giving...sins or mistakes that are not honoring our

relationship with God, and our relationships with others. Still these answers are unsatisfactory as we continue to raise these kinds of questions: Why does God allow hunger? Why does God allow earthquakes and tsunamis and other natural disasters? Why does God allow human trafficking of women, boys and girls? Why did God allow the Holocaust? Why does God allow a national leader to deny the Holocaust now re-inflicting pain? Why does God allow an unfair distribution of power in the world?

These questions cause us to question the omnipotence of God...that God is all powerful. Our modern mind knows that there is a natural world that causes suffering. Our modern mind knows that God has given us the freedom of choice, where the free will of some tramples on the human rights of others. Our modern mind knows that God is not a superhero to come to our rescue or Santa Claus to grant us our every wish. Our modern knows that we cannot explain suffering. Our modern mind knows these things...but our modern heart like the heart of humanity for all time still cries with psalmist in the face of suffering, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!"

However, this cry is not most familiar to us on the lips of the psalmist but from the Cross when Christ at the pinnacle point of his suffering quotes it, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!" Bonhoeffer from the prison in Nazi Germany said, "Only a suffering God can help." In other words, only God who knows what suffering is can help us. Jesus suffered then, God suffers with us now, through the Holy Spirit. We cannot explain suffering, but we, as a church and individuals, witness to God's experience with us in suffering. Remember the Family Circle comic I told you about, God our heavenly parent does see things from our perspective and helps us to work through them.

So Paul tells us, "Be patient in suffering," This translation is actually watered down from the original Greek which could be translated, "endure the squeeze" and even that is a bit watered down, "endure the crushing" is closer or picture this, "endure the vise grip!" How? Remember the bookends? Through hope, through prayer, but also remember all of this is in context of living in relationships with God and others through grace. How does "Grace Happen" in the midst of suffering? In our crying out to God and to one another for help! Suffering results from our being/feeling powerless. When the things around us, disasters, disease, death, destroyed relationships, overwhelm us, we feel powerless. We can feel trapped, held in the vise grip of the pain. We can be annoyed by it; like I've been annoyed by these posters in my way this morning. We can want to ignore it, like some of you in the back saying those posters are too far away for me to know what they are so why bother. Or we can choose to act; to be with and for one another, in times of suffering, through times of suffering!

Last Sunday a teenager, who has been patient in his own suffering, came to me and asked what he could do to help those suffering from the disaster in Samoa. Could he help by sending money through the church? "Absolutely," I said and I explained to him the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance program. This is a young man, who knows in his heart that suffering cannot be explained, only responded to and not only far away but also nearby.

One of my favorite verses is from the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, "two are better than one, for if one falls the other will help them up." Henri Nouwen, a 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, in his book The

Wounded Healer said, "A Christian community is a healing community not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings and occasions for a new vision." David Biebel, in his book If God is So Good, Why Do I Hurt So Bad? Shares that the Vietnamese word for crisis literally translated means "danger-opportunity." What is our opportunity? What is our vision? To be the church God is calling us to be...in this time of suffering [point to the posters;] we can "endure the squeeze" through genuine love and with mutual affection, affirming for one another and witnessing to the world that the deeper our suffering the greater our joy!

Amen